

Project Escalation Processes

A team can use escalation processes to raise project issues to higher authorities for timely resolution. An escalation process ensures that the next level of management is informed (often within a specific period of time) if an issue cannot be resolved at the lower level.

TYPICAL SITUATIONS REQUIRING ESCALATION

Typical project situations requiring escalation include:

- **Resource conflicts:** During a project, people are pulled off project work to assist with problems in the field, threatening the project's ability to meet its schedule. The project manager needs to escalate the issue to the project stakeholder—to make sure the project impact is recognized and understood; to lobby for not losing the resource or gaining a replacement; and to help get to a workable solution to protect the goals of the project.
- **Scope disagreement and feature creep:** At the beginning of a project, the team cannot reach a workable tradeoff of scope, time, money, people, and quality; or during a project, someone requests that the agreed-upon project scope be changed to add a new feature or deliverable and the team can't agree on a solution. The team needs the project stakeholder(s) or upper management to make the decision or help resolve the issue.
- **Deliverables issues:** Late in a project, there are issues with the project's main deliverable (product, system, software, document, whatever it may be), and the team believes the issue can't be corrected within the original time, scope, and cost goals of the project. A tough decision must be made as to whether to release with the current problem or shortfall, or delay project completion to resolve it. The team will often need to escalate such a major issue to management.
- **Testing issues:** When a user community or a customer is asked to participate in testing prior to a product or system's release, the tests may be in or close to an operational environment and the customer's overall perception of the product and of the test team is important. Escalation procedures provide an agreement as to how the user/customer will be able to get critical issues to management's attention quickly.
- **Issues among groups:** When functional groups owe each other deliverables during a project and one group is running late with what another group needs to stay on schedule, the issue may need to be escalated. Another example would be if the contents of one group's work conflict with what the other group is developing and the mismatches have to be resolved. The purpose is to highlight the problem to the respective functional management so priorities can be

examined, resource decisions made, technical or content issues worked, and the situation resolved.

GOALS, INPUTS, AND OUTPUTS OF ESCALATION PROCESSES

Goals of an Escalation Process:

- Create a mentality that tough issues should be raised to the next level of management quickly enough to enable a timely decision; not fester without resolution and delay the project.
- Define whom issues should be raised to and within what timeframe, to ensure and enable quick action.
- Keep senior management informed about key issues affecting the project and the business. (Sometimes escalation processes are designed to allow executives to monitor issues, without necessarily taking immediate action.)
- Set expectations early about how certain issues will be raised to upper levels of management, to avoid anyone feeling like a management appeal was made in order to go over their head.

Typical inputs to an Escalation process:

- **Tracking:** A way of keeping track of project issues, regularly reviewing them, and determining their significance, so teams see which issues should be escalated. This can be accomplished with mechanisms such as issue logs, project status meetings, and bug reviews.
- **Documentation:** Supporting information that will help those addressing escalated issues to understand the context and impact of the issue. This information allows them to make informed tradeoffs if they are being asked to make a decision or provide guidance.

Typical Outcomes of an Escalation Process:

- **Decisions or Guidance for Decision-Making:** Issues are resolved by management's decision, or the team is given direction and parameters/constraints as to how to solve the problem themselves.
- **Documentation:** Decisions are documented so that everyone knows how the issue was resolved.

Example Escalation Processes

The following are examples of different escalation process for various teams and their project issues.

Example of General Escalation Guidelines

The following guidelines can be documented in one place, as in a project management plan, or can be published as needed or included in separate documents related to the corresponding activities.

Team Escalation Guidelines: The following typical and important project issues will be handled as noted when they arise. The purpose of documenting these approaches is to be set to resolve issues quickly.

Resource conflicts: If a functional resource on a sub-team is reassigned part-time to field maintenance:

- Person notifies Project Manager immediately and together they determine potential impact on project.
- If major milestone dates are threatened by loss of this resource's time, the PM will escalate to functional manager to resolve.
- If they cannot find a way for the person to meet both sets of goals, the PM will highlight the issue to the Project Sponsor for resolution, providing info on the potential project impact, and any tradeoffs considered with the functional manager.

Scope deadlock during Initiation Phase: (agreed upon by team at beginning of Initiation Phase)

- If the team cannot come to an agreement on project scope, time, cost, and quality, the issue will be escalated to the Project Sponsor.
- The sponsor will be invited to a project review to cover alternatives considered to-date and discuss options. The PM will ensure that appropriate functional team members are present to discuss the conflicting project scope demands.
- The Project Sponsor will clarify constraints and ask the team for further analysis, or if possible, make the decision on the project scope.

Dependency Issues Among Groups: (agreed upon at or soon after team kickoff). If another group (including an outside development group) owes your sub-team a deliverable and project status monitoring indicates that the deliverable is likely to be late:

- Manager of the sub-team raises the issue to the PM in the weekly Project Status meeting, or via email as soon as the issue is perceived.
- The PM and sub-team lead assess the potential impact to the project and the latest possible date by which the team can receive the deliverable and stay on track.

- The PM and sub-team manager communicate the issue to the responsible functional manager (to head of responsible group at outside firm if that is the situation).
- The PM and Functional manager work toward a solution. If Functional Manager cannot commit to his resources meeting the deadline (because of competing commitments, etc.), the PM escalates the issue to the Project Sponsor for resolution. If an outside firm is involved, the person with responsibility for contract oversight must also be involved.

Excerpt from an Escalation Process in a Formal Project Management Plan

This example comes from a team in a large organization, and a project involving several sub-teams and related systems. The excerpt is from a team document covering all aspects of project monitoring and control, including sections on project meeting management, status reports, and other communication. The Issue Management section excerpted below included details on escalation processes.

Issue Management: As the project evolves, issues will surface and risk will be introduced to the project. To ensure the issues are managed so that risk is appropriately mitigated, control processes must be implemented. The following processes will be deployed for issue management and risk mitigation:

Identifying and Capturing Issues: The project lead is responsible for capturing all issues via a standard issue log document. As issues are raised, the project lead will ensure the issue is clearly named and concisely defined, that a priority factor is assessed (urgent, high, medium, low), that resolution responsibility is assigned, and that an estimated date for completion is assigned (not greater than three weeks out). Each of these elements will be captured as one row in the issue document.

Monitoring Issues: The project lead and the Project Office will monitor the issues to ensure they are worked to closure. The project lead should update the status indicator in the Status column (Not-Started, In-Progress, Resolved, Canceled) as the issue progresses. The project lead will query the responsible party for status at least once per week until the issue is successfully closed.

Escalating Issues: Occasionally, issues require escalation to a higher level of management for monitoring or executive decisions. For this project, issues of this nature will be escalated to the Project Stakeholder Team. First, the project lead will update the issue (record) in the Master Issues List to read “Stakeholder” in the Escalation column. Second, the appropriate project group lead will meet with the Project Director at least once per week to review issues.

Issues common to projects across the organization will be identified and escalated to the Project Director. The respective project lead will escalate appropriate issues to the Project Director in two ways. First, the project lead will update the issue (record) in the Master Issues List to read “Director” in the Escalation column. Second, the lead will meet with the Project Director at least once per week to communicate newly

escalated issues and provide/receive status regarding existing issues. The Project Director and project lead will work together to create an escalation document. The escalation document will be saved to the internal project website then distributed to the appropriate recipients for follow-up. Additionally, the lead will update the issue log by noting the action taken in the appropriate columns and creating a link to the escalation document in the appropriate escalation link field. The project lead and Project Director are responsible for continually communicating with appropriate parties to ensure escalated issues are managed to effective resolution.

To ensure issues are appropriately escalated and effectively managed to resolution, the following criteria should be used to determine the appropriate escalation action for an issue:

- Major feature deficiency issue: Escalated to Overall Project Manager upon occurrence. Escalated to Project Sponsor if team cannot resolve problem within one week of discovery.
- Conflicting resource issues: Escalated immediately to project lead; Project Manager will escalate to involved functional managers to work the problem. If a resolution cannot be reached within one week, it will be escalated to the overall Project Director and the Project Sponsor.
- Scope change decisions: Analyze request within one week. Notify Project Director and Project Sponsor if change can be accommodated with low risk and without impacting schedule and cost. Escalate to both for resolution if the change involves more risk and could impact schedule or cost.
- Interface issues with legacy systems: Escalate to involved Technical Leads to work issue. Based on their assessment, keep Project Sponsor and Project Director informed at a minimum; escalate issue to Technology VP and Project Sponsor if issues affect major performance specifications or schedule.

Communicating Issue Status: The project lead is responsible for communicating project issue status to the project teams and stakeholders: verbally at each regularly scheduled project status meeting, and written status on a weekly basis by 5pm each Friday. By 9am Monday, the Project Office will post the updated document to the project website and send electronic copies to the Steering Committee's office.

Example of Escalation Included in Agreement with a Beta Test Customer

The excerpt below is a portion of a Beta Test agreement signed by a company with a key customer who agreed to test the new factory machine before its formal release to the marketplace. A section on escalation processes was included in the Beta Test Plan, within the section on problem recording and issues resolution.

Problem Recording, Issues Management and Escalation, and Resolution

Recording of issues by Company and Customer:

- Customer operators will log all machine down time, including reason and duration.
- Company Service Manager will review this productivity report daily to be aware of issues and report to Company management.
- Company Test Technician will keep his own log of machine issues and downtime. The issues logging format will provide a way for Company to record and verify resolution of each issue
- The Company Test Technician will also keep an overall log of machine configuration and usage.
- Company will provide a form for Customer personnel to record their suggestions and recommendations for improvement. This log will be reviewed periodically, at least once a week, as determined by Project Manager and Customer Manager.

Daily issues review and prioritization:

- The Company Service Manager and Project Manager will review the log of issues that occurred during that day's production or testing. Priorities will be established for resulting machine work or further testing that must happen that next day, meshing those requirements with any work previously planned for that next day.
- The Company Project Manager will keep a list of parts needed and review it each day with the Company factory point of contact.
- The Company Project Manager will be the point of contact for managing materials/parts needed to get out to the customer.

Escalation of issues to Management:

The following types of issues warrant immediate reporting to both Company and Customer management. The Company test manager, or the Company test technician if the manager is not present, is responsible for escalating such issues to the Customer representative.

- ***Safety issue:*** any safety incident.
- ***Major machine breakage or part failure or frequent downtime:*** If down for more than 30 minutes and interfering with production quotas for the day, this will be escalated to both the Company and Customer representatives.
- ***Other serious concerns about machine performance raised by Customer personnel:*** will be communicated to Company Service Manager and Project Manager for consideration and action.

Example of Simple Escalation Instructions for Users Helping Test a New Application

This example shows a very simple approach to escalations in this situation. Internal users are helping test a new application prior to its release. The project team's goal is to ensure they get quick support for any questions they have or issues they encounter during the testing. It makes support time frames clear and creates a sense of urgency by using response time frames—it shows users what to do to get the fast support they need.

Support Time: Monday – Friday 7:00 am – 5:00 pm ET

1st LEVEL:

User Support group: **1-800-555-5555, option 2**

2nd LEVEL

(To be used if you have left a message for the User Support group, you have an emergency and no one has returned your call within 30 minutes.)

Mark Smith, User Services Supervisor for Pre-Release Testing

Office Phone: **1-800-555-5555, option 1, ext. 312**

Cell Phone: **333-555-2222.**

3rd LEVEL

(To be used if you have left a message for Mark Smith and he has not returned your call within 30 minutes.)

Pamela Johnson, Vice President of Support

Office Phone: **1-800-555-5555, option 1, ext. 309**

Cell Phone: **333-555-8888.**

Please follow the escalation path above if you have questions during your testing, if you need help with an issue to continue testing, or in the case of a category 1 'crash' or data integrity problem that the team should see immediately.

You may also use this path if you are dissatisfied with the service you have received or the progress being made on an issue that you have reported to the User Support group as part of this testing.

Example of Escalation of Corporate Database Changes Required

This example escalation applies to the situation where a corporate database is being maintained and affected by new application development projects. The group with

overall responsibility for that database needs a process to ensure cooperation and coordination between the groups supplying database information and owning related applications. This escalation process is designed to manage any changes to or deletion of a data structure in the corporate database by showing how to get agreement from all the owners of applications that access that data.

Identification and Resolution of Data Changes

The triggers that will bring data issues and needed changes to light are:

- Business Area Analyses
- New Applications being developed
- Releases of Applications (which include changes in business rules, new legislation, user requested enhancements, etc.)
- Information Access

Issue Identification: The Data Administrator and the Data Standards Manager(s) involved in the projects are responsible for identifying the issues. Issues will be identified through data modeling done in the projects. Data issues may also be recognized before the data modeling process identifies them; they should be dealt with when identified by the Data Standards Manager(s) involved. Issues may be also raised outside a project, when a user discovers that some data they require is not available or is not defined as they require it. In this case, the user will refer the issue to the Data Custodian.

Issue Review and Clarification: The Data Standards Managers for all the branches affected by the data issue and the Data Administrator will meet to clarify the requirements, define the issues, assess the impacts, define the alternatives, and finally to produce a recommendation to proceed. The recommendation to proceed goes to the Project Sponsor.

Issue Escalation: If the issue cannot be resolved at the Data Standards Manager level, the issue must be referred to the next level of authority: the Project Sponsor.

Accompanying Information: A Data Issue Notice should be developed that describes the issue, the effect to business, and alternatives. The Data Issue Notice could be initiated by a Data Standards Manager or the Data Administrator. The notice will be distributed to the relevant Data Standards Manager(s), Data Custodian(s), Application Custodian(s), and the Project Sponsor. The Project Sponsor and the Data Custodians will resolve the issue with input from the Data Administrator as required. The Project Sponsor will be supported by the Project Manager and the Data Custodians will be supported by the Data Standards Managers.

If the issue cannot be resolved at the Project Sponsor/Data Custodian level, it will be escalated to the Executive by the Project Sponsor.

Example of a Management Steering Committee's Process for Handling Escalated Issues

This example documents the steps a Project Steering Committee will take on each time an issue is escalated to it for decision.

Issues and Problem Resolution

The Steering Committee is responsible for resolving issues brought forward by the Project Manager and Business Lead. If the issue cannot be resolved by the Steering Committee, the chairperson will take the issue forward to the Executive Management Committee.

The committee will follow this process for each issue:

1. Understand the issue and identify all potential impacts.
2. Determine the areas affected such as business processes, data, configuration, infrastructure, etc.
3. Solicit input from committee members for recommended solutions.
4. Assign additional tasks to committee members if necessary to investigate alternate solutions and schedule a date for follow-up.
5. Ensure majority of the committee agrees with recommended solution.
6. Request Project Manager to follow-up on closure and provide status at next meeting.
7. If issue remains unresolved, chairperson will take forward to the Executive Management Committee as soon as possible, preferably within two business days.
8. Chairperson will communicate decision reached by Executive Management Committee to Project Manager and Steering Committee members as soon as notification is received.

Administrative Information

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